THEIR LAST MEETING

By Cy Warman

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Every morning for a month or more the man had come to the gate in the outer office and asked to see the general manager. Every morning the office boy had given him a blank form to fill out.

"Mr. A."

"Wishes to see—Mr. B."

"Business—private."

As often as the boy went in with the slip of paper he came back with the answer, "The general manager is too busy to see you."

In time the employees learned to look not at the clock for the hour of 10, but to the gate that swung in the low fence. When he had come and gone thirty-seven times, leaving thirty-seven neatly filled requests behind him, the manager instructed the boy.

"Mr. A.," said the boy and closed the door of the private office, leaving the two men alone. The general manager was embarrassed. Instead of a long haired, hollow eyed crank, with soiled linen covering his concaved chest, his caller was a well dressed, intelligent looking gentleman.

"Delighted, delighted, Mr. B.," said the stranger, advancing with outstretched hand. "So good of you to see me! Yes, I did call the other—yes, yes, I know how busy you are! Just so, just so! Ah-h!"

The men shook hands hurriedly, eying each other precisely as a pair of prizefighters enter the ring.

The manager noticed for the first time a peculiar look in the man's eyes. "Sit down," said the stranger, and the railway man sank back into his swinging chair. "I shan't take much of your time—this time," said the visitor, hooking one leg over the corner of the table and sagging into a comfortable pose. The manager felt fidgety under the stranger's inquisitive, soul searching eyes.

"I've got a good thing," said the man, keeping his eyes upon the manager's conscience.

"I was afraid of that," said the manager half playfully, but the man did not smile.

"You have some heavy grades on your line."

"Yes," assented the manager.

"You have doubtless observed that it is almost invariably upon a mountain that the air plays out. Just when they are needed most is when the brakes refuse to work. You know that, don't you?"

"Yes."

"Well, I've spent sleepless nights working out a system that will always work and save millions of money now lost in wrecked rolling stock and thousands of useful lives."

"What is your scheme? My time is limited."

"First of all, you shall build for me a mammoth windmill on the banks of the Missouri. The ceaseless winds that come crying across Colorado and Kansas will push the paddles in the big wheel, which, revolving, will drive a great pump that will force air through a small pipe to be laid along the line under the ties. Beneath each water tank upon the mountain side we shall build an air tank, so that while the fireman takes water the brakeman can take air, filling the air drum with good valley air, and then there will be no trouble. It is because the mountain air is too light to hold that the trains get away on the hills. Knowing this, the blood of innocent men, women and children will be upon your head if you fail to protect the lives of your patrons."

"I'll see you again about this," said the manager, putting on his hat and leading the way out through a private door. All the way out the man kept close to the manager. The elevator dropped them to the ground floor. The manager called a cab. As the door closed the man reached through the open window into the carriage, pressed the manager's hand and said significantly, looking deep into the railroad man's soul, "You won't lose me."

The inventor continued to call upon the manager, every day at first, then twice a week and later only three or four times a month.

One evening the general manager sat in a box at the theater. Between acts a gentleman who sat almost directly behind the railroad man left the box for a moment. Presently the general manager became aware that his friend had resumed his seat, and, with his gaze still on the audience, remarked: "I lose half the pleasure of the play because of an innate dread of fire. I wish somebody would invent something that would put out fire without drowning people."

"I can do it," said the man at the manager's elbow.

"How?"

"How do you put out a candle?"

"Well, I would blow it out."

"Exactly. First I would lay a system of air pipes under the building."

The manager felt a chill creeping slowly over him. Somewhere he had heard that voice before. He began slowly to turn his head, but his neighbor put a hand upon his shoulder and bade him listen. "You tremble when your own life is in danger," said the man, "but you do not tremble for the hundreds of lives that are constantly endangered by your carelessness, narrowness and stinginess. On yonder mountain side tonight people play at the open door of death as"—

"Ahem!" said the manager's friend, returning to the box. The wind crank seeing that he held the gentleman's seat, arose, smiled, bowed and walked away.

Always after that the manager carried about with him a haunting dread of the wind crank. He would turn a corner in a crowded street and meet him face to face, and for the briefest moment the man would search the soul of the manager. Once in the city that was headquarters for the company they held a great exhibition, and the general manager was chosen to welcome the president of the United States. The moment he came to the edge of the platform and faced the waiting multitude, waiting not to hear the railroad man, but the president, he became embarrassed. "Ladies and gentlemen," he began, "I see before me"—

Here the speaker paused awkwardly, like a schoolboy who has forgotten his lines. Before him rose the gaunt face of the wind crank, who stood in the front row, towering above his neighbors.

Pulling himself together, the railroad man went on. His friends began to tremble for him. What he said had nothing to do with the exhibition, the president or the people there assembled. "The company has always endeavored to keep abreast of the times. We have adopted every safety appliance that has been invented, but so long as human hands, guided by the brain of man"—

At that point a man who was intelligent when he was sober broke in on the orator, "Oh, come offen th' perch an' let som'on' talk 'at can talk sense!"

Blushing to the very roots of his hair, this local orator, the man who had been called "the Chauncey of the west," stumbled from the stage.

At last the long winter came to an end, and the inventor went away with the snow. At all events, the manager had been rid of him for a long while when one day his special stood upon a short spur near the mountain top waiting for the eastbound overland express. Presently the party were made aware of the approach of the opposing train, but instead of the low singing of the rail, for which they had been listening, they heard suddenly the roar of a runaway train and the frantic cry of a locomotive for brakes. The flagman who had opened the switch to let the special back in on the spur stood there waiting to let them out again when the express should pass. All the people had climbed down from the waiting train to stretch themselves. The engineer was oiling his engine. The fireman had climbed up a bank to gather some wild flowers that grew where a little stream of clear cold water gurgled from the rocks. Seeing the flagman still holding to the switch, the general manager ran toward him, calling to him to let go and stand back.

What might have happened if the manager had remained quiet no man knoweth, but when the flagman saw him coming and heard him shouting without understanding what he was saying he glanced nervously in the direction of the approaching train. The wild engine at that moment rounded a curve and headed down a short tangent straight for the switch. The flagman was seen to glance back again at his own train, which stood well in the clear, then throw his weight on the switch lever. Over went the rail for the spur, and across it came the flying train.

An air hose had blown off just as they tipped over the top of the hill (this was before the days of the self acting, self adjusting automatic air brake), and the few hand brakes at the crew's command had served only to steady the train. They could not hold the big mountain engine, and now she shot in on the spur, wide open, spitting fire and screaming like a wild fiend. She hit the special with a crash that shook the very hills. The special train, with its lighter locomotive, was driven back three cars or more and crushed like an eggshell against the rock cliff that rose perpendicularly at the far end of the spur. The heavy sleepers crushed the mail and express cars against the wrecked locomotives. There were the old familiar shrieks of the broken engines, the moans of the mangled and the excited shouts of the rescuers. The general manager had succeeded in dragging a man from the ruins and placing him in an easy position. The man appeared to be quite dead. As the manager was about to turn away something tugged feebly at his sleeve. The manager stooped down, put his ear to the man's breast, peered into his face and then stepped back with a startled expression. Now, with the superhuman strength that sometimes comes to dying men, the wreck lifted his head and looked with strange, wild eyes into the face of the manager.

"Oh, you murderer! Do you still argue that you can hold a train with mountain air? Now, with a system of air pipes—running up from the valley—all this wreck—and—death"—

The general manager put his ear down again, but the troubled heart was hushed.

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